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July 24, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

I write to urge you to include robust funding to ensure appropriate care for our nation's veterans in the next novel coronavirus (COVID-19) relief package. While assistance was included in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, more is needed as this pandemic continues to take a devastating toll on our nation, its veterans, and those caring for our veterans.

Sufficient resources should be included in the relief package to ensure that veterans have timely and safe access to care they need and the benefits they have earned. With the increased use and reliance on telehealth to provide care for veterans and to facilitate the benefits process, additional funding is needed to expand access to this technology to improve care and ensure the safety of veterans and caregivers.

The next relief package should also include funding to ensure that those who provide care for our veterans have adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). During this pandemic, there have been widespread reports of shortages of PPE at VA facilities as well as at State Veterans Homes, including at the Rhode Island Veterans Home. These shortages have led to the spread of COVID-19 among employees of these facilities. The CARES Act authorized the VA to share materials with State Veterans Homes, but it needs resources to offer this assistance.

Additionally, the next relief package must provide more direct support to State Veterans Homes. This should include increased per diem reimbursements and financial support. Outbreaks of COVID-19 and related deaths have devastated State Veterans Homes. Many states are struggling to cope with the economic effects of this pandemic and, as a result, may be unable to provide the resources that State Veterans Homes require.

Lastly, the VA should be provided more funding to improve recruitment and retention of staff, particularly readjustment counselors at Vet Centers, as well as mental health care personnel. We must do everything we can to bolster VA's ability to respond to the current crisis, combat the scourge of veteran suicide, and ensure timely access to treatment of mental and other illnesses. Having VA facilities properly staffed is critical to this task. Similarly, ensuring that VA staff are properly compensated would improve staffing and retention levels and recognize the critical services provided by VA's dedicated employees.

I urge you to devote these necessary resources in the next relief package to improve the quality of care, and safety of, veterans and their caregivers.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jack Reed". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jack" and last name "Reed" clearly distinguishable.

Jack Reed
United States Senator